

SERMON FOR THE 2ND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 14 June 2009)

Text: ¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' ²⁵ "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' ²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' ²⁹ "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' ³⁰ "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' ³¹ "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19-31)

When you read this parable for the first time you get the impression that is all about being "rich" or "poor" and the punishment or reward they receive in the afterlife. But that is not the focus of this parable. We get an idea of what this parable is all about, when we look at the topic of this Sunday, called "Apostles and Prophets". The parable is in short a reflection on what it means to be obedient to the Law of God as provided by "Moses and the Prophets".

When we reflect on the Law of God, or even the laws of our country in general, we usually have mixed feelings. Sometimes a law evokes a very warm and positive feeling. This is always the case when we sense that the law is really on our side. An example would be the law that you shall not steal. I like this law, because strictly speaking this law helps to protect my home and other possessions. But then again sometimes laws that turn against you can be very irritating. I, for example, usually get very upset when I get a speeding fine. I am not a fast driver. But invariably I get caught in these 80 or 60Km zones. And then I rationalise why I shouldn't pay the fine: "It didn't make sense to have a speed trap there in the first place. Or it was a Saturday afternoon. I wasn't endangering anybody by driving a bit faster." And I am quite sure that you do the same.

Now it was this twisting of the law given by "Moses and the prophets" that Jesus was addressing in this parable. In ancient Israel there was a divine law about the poor. God promised his blessing on his people in the new land he gave them, but then added that there should be no poor people in Israel. He singled out the orphans, the widows and the poor for special care. It was in view of the poor, that God introduced the tithe. And in order to encourage the people to adhere to this law, he gave them a great promise. Through his prophet Malachi he said: ***"Bring the whole tithe (don't cheat me on this) ... and (if you do it) I will throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it"*** (Mal.3:10).

But do you know what? The rich didn't always tithe. Or if they did tithe, they didn't share the money with the poor. Why not? Invariably they rationalised this law. This is exactly what the rich man did in this parable. Outside of his gate was a beggar called Lazarus. Lazarus wasn't only poor, but desperately poor. But the rich man did not cross the gate to help this poor man. Why not? He rationalised: Beggars don't need to be helped! For him it was quite clear, Lazarus was not a

God-fearing man. If he was, he wouldn't be in this terrible state in the first place. Lazarus was also full of sores which rendered him unclean. And he (the rich man) striving towards holiness must guard against contamination.

Furthermore, the rich man saw his holiness confirmed by his wealth. And in thankfulness towards God, who blessed him so abundantly, he would through sumptuous banquets for his family and friends. And while they were celebrating, there was a poor man in Israel dying outside of his gate. He is sidelined to such a degree that he can't even eat what falls from the rich man's table. The dogs eat it first.

The contrast between the two is staggering. The rich man lives in a villa on a hill top (most probably) in Jerusalem. By means of a bridge he has direct access to the temple of God. Lazarus lives in the valley outside of Jerusalem. It is only in the day time that he may enter the city. During the night he is locked out. From the temple he is barred because he is unclean and doesn't always tithe. The rich man is dressed in a purple robe with fine (white) linen, the attire of a king. Lazarus is dressed with sores. The rich man believes, he is blessed by God for his pious life. Lazarus experiences nothing but rejection.

But whether you are rich or poor, one day you must die. Lazarus, the beggar, dies first. There is not mention of him being honoured by a proper burial. In fact the chances are great that they just dumped him in a deep gorge in the valley south of Jerusalem.

But surprise, surprise. In the afterlife, guess where Lazarus finds himself? By the angels of God he is carried to the side of Abraham. He experiences what had always been captured by his name. Lazarus means: "God helps"! And while he lived on earth, that is all he had: A God that helps.

Some time later the rich man also dies. He gets a proper burial. Jesus doesn't say what words were spoken at his burial. But I bet you his eulogy was as long as a sermon: "He was a good and holy man, praise the Lord", everybody would have surmised.

But when in the afterlife the rich man opens his eyes, he is in torment. He is in hell. What a shock! And when he looks up, he discovers to his own dismay, this beggar he had always ignored sitting on the other side in Abraham's bosom. And he calls out to Abraham and says: "***Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.***" How ironic! He never crossed the gate. He never showed any pity or mercy on Lazarus. But now Lazarus must come and comfort him!! Worse is: The rich man still hasn't changed. Like a boss, he still commands: "Send Lazarus to me!" He *demand*s mercy.

Mercy! If only this rich man had understood: At the heart of God's Law is mercy. Every law that God gives is full of mercy. You can reflect on the law. You may even rationalise the law. But if you take the "mercy" out of it, you have missed the point. And by the way, mercy means: Here is a free gift, given to you without any merit! But the rich man still thinks in terms of merit. He is a privileged Israelite. "Father Abraham" must stand in for him.

But there is another connotation attached to the name of Abraham, which the rich man totally overlooked. Abraham himself was a very rich man. But that is not what people remembered him for. In ancient Israel Abraham was conveyed as a "model of generosity and hospitality". No man ever was as generous and hospitable as Abraham. He was rich, excessively rich. But his wealth never defined him. What defined him was his mercy, his generosity towards the poor. In this sense, the rich man in the parable was not a child of Abraham.

But Abraham, being who he is, does not respond to the rich man in an unkind manner. He confirms kinship. He says to the rich man: ***“Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”*** His wish that Lazarus should come to him is not granted. And it is not granted, because it cannot be granted. There is a big chasm that separates the two, that cannot be crossed.

There are times when chasms can be crossed. There are times when gates can be opened. But not in the afterlife. As the rich man realises this, he seems to have a change of heart. At least he stops to command, but “begs” Abraham to send Lazarus to his father’s house to warn his five brothers. But even here there is no “true” repentance. The rich man still thinks only in terms of his own: “His” family, “his” brothers. He still doesn’t look beyond the gate.

The rich man is quite sure, if somebody from the dead would go to his father’s house, then they would listen. But again, the wish is not granted. Why not? Abraham explains: ***“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.”*** In other words, it is not a matter of not knowing something. The law of God has always been clear and throughout the ages it has always been communicated well. With regard to the rich we read in Deuteronomy 15:4: ***“There will... be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that he is giving to you as a possession to occupy”.*** There is God’s clear will: I will bless you in the land I will give you, but you in turn must show mercy to those less fortunate.

And, dear friends, in many other areas of life God’s will is clear. His ten commandments are clear: You shall have no other gods, you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, you shall remember the Sabbath Day, you shall not commit adultery, etc, etc.

Rationalising these laws in a way that you don’t really need to keep them, has consequences. But can we keep them? Human history testifies quite clearly: “No”. But just because I cannot keep them all, does not mean I should rationalise them.

The “cross” shows what I can do. I can go to the man on the cross, God’s son, Jesus Christ, and say: “I am Sorry”. I can pray like the tax-collector in the temple and say: “God have mercy on me!” And God has mercy, because he *is* mercy. I can also pray to God and say: “Send me the Holy Spirit, whom you promised. Take my heart of stone, and turn it into a heart of flesh, a heart that shows mercy.” And he does.

As noted, this parable is not primarily about “rich” or “poor”. It is about a God who has revealed his love through “Moses and the prophets” and wants to show mercy. And he wants you and me to be his instruments of mercy, wherever he has placed us. Amen.

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